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## Hidden and unspoiled: image building in the tourism industry of Belize

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**Abstract:** This paper focuses on the way the Belizean tourism industry is coping with changes caused by diversification of the Belizean product. The image of Belize as a hidden paradise, unspoiled and with consideration for the natural environment has been built, for a large part, on the conventional dichotomy of (destructive) mass tourism on the one hand and (sustainable) small-scale tourism on the other. By focusing on cave tourism in Belize the authors explore ideas on tourism development and image building, with a focus on authenticity and sustainability. Different spatial and branding strategies for mass and small tourism are suggested.

**Keywords:** image building; social construction; authenticity; sustainability; tourism policy; Belize.

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## 1 Introduction

“Image, or the imagined, is every bit as important, if not more so, than the real, particularly in the world of tourism and more specifically tourism advertising. (...) The degree to which this image can be maintained will be largely determined by the reality of trips to Belize and the way in which tourists measure their experience against the imagery that compelled them to make the journey in the first place. Both the government and private concerns have large roles to play in the future of the Belizean tourism industry.” (Phillips, 1994, p.11)

In the 1960s Belize was known primarily amongst divers as a diving destination. Since the late 1980s Belize started to encourage ecotourism, archaeological tourism and adventure tourism. Apart from the marine reserves, nowadays the natural beauty and historical past on the mainland prominently figure in Belize’s tourism marketing (Duffy, 2002; Palacio and McCool, 1997; Woods et al., 1992). By presenting Belize as ‘the adventure coast’ and “Mother nature’s best kept secret”, not just pleasure, but action, exploration and an authentic experience are promoted. These slogans, but also others such as the phrase ‘Discover Hidden Belize’ on the cover of a magazine (Phillips, 1994, p.11), give this country in Central America the image of a place that is unique, unspoiled, and somehow exclusive.

In this paper we intent to provide an insight into the effect the growth of tourism has had, and still has, on the process of image building in the tourism industry of Belize. The image of Belize as a hidden paradise, unspoiled and with consideration for the natural environment has been built, for a large part, on the conventional dichotomy of (destructive) mass tourism on the one hand and (sustainable) small-scale tourism on the other. The specific focus of the paper is twofold. First it describes the branding of Belize as an unspoiled and hidden tourism destination against the rapidly growing cruise ship sector in light of concepts and practices related to authenticity and sustainability. It concentrates on the contrasting experiences of cave tourism. Second the paper focuses on the strategies used by local entrepreneurs to cope with these developments.

## 2 Theoretical background

### 2.1 Image building in tourism

When it comes to the Caribbean most people think about sunny, white beach paradise islands, colourful cocktails and lively music. Many Western tourists see the Caribbean as a dream destination for a luxury cruise or tropical beach vacation. What is common for

most Caribbean destinations (if not all) is that their tourism industry “is vested in the branding and marketing of Paradise” (Sheller, 2004, p.23). Whether beach paradises or Gardens of Eden with exotic vegetation and adventurous caves, it is all about selling a certain image to attract tourists. Images in tourism are used to differentiate one tourism destination from the other. Sea and sand destinations are often associated with a different type of tourist than so-called ‘frontier’ countries (Echtner and Prasad, 2003). Images of the first portray vacationers, sun seekers and lovers, whilst the representations of frontier countries (either or not combined with sun, sand and sea) portray adventurers, explorers and nature lovers (Echtner and Prasad, 2003). Tourism, to quote Sofield, is about differences:

“In its marketing endeavours, it is constantly striving to differentiate one destination from another, one product from another, one experience from another – to create difference.” (Sofield, 2000, p.117)

In tourism marketing, as in any other form of marketing, it is important that the ‘producers’ of tourism destinations create images that appeal to the motives and desires of the potential visitors, the tourists. Contrary to most other forms of marketing, the image not merely refers to a product, but also to people and places. For that reason authors have begun to address the lack of critical attention to the context surrounding the representation of Third World countries in tourism marketing. Either by using notions of orientalism (Silver, 1993), critical colonial theory and the working of discourse (Echtner and Prasad, 2003), the recreation of social reality (Morgan and Pritchard, 1998) or ideology (Ateljevic and Doorne, 2002), awareness to the power structures behind tourism images is raised. It is argued that these images reflect economical, historical and colonial relations and the different interests of the actors involved. The image of a country is the result of various influences prior and during tourist visits, including media effects and travel advertisements such as books and brochures (Buzinde et al., 2006; Echtner and Prasad, 2003; Dann, 1996; Mercille, 2005; Morgan and Pritchard, 1998; Silver, 1993) and through interactions between tourists and local service providers such as tour operators and tour guides (Bras, 2000; Dahles, 2002; Salazar, 2006). The image or representation of a country as a tourism destination is a social construction that involves various stakeholders, such as the private sector, NGO’s, governments, local communities and tourists themselves. Discussions on images of destinations have often been linked to those concerning the concept of ‘authenticity’ in tourism.

## *2.2 Authenticity*

Authenticity, as numerous debates in the tourism literature demonstrate, is an important concept for scholars in tourism and practitioners alike. Several scholars have applied Goffman’s (1959) distinction between frontstage and backstage, as two different settings for everyday life social behaviour, to show that actors in tourist destinations use ethnic acts to attract tourists (e.g., Kroshus Medina, 2003; MacCannell, 1976; Roessingh and Bras, 2003; Roessingh and Duijnhoven, 2004). Staged performances in tourist settings on the frontstage are somewhat different from the so-called ‘authentic’ backstage manifestations of culture backstage. It is argued that tourists are motivated by a lack of meaning and hence they are driven by a search for authentic or real experiences (Cohen, 1988; MacCannell, 1976; van den Berghe and Keys, 1984). Authenticity then means ‘original’, ‘unchanged’ or ‘exotic’, something the tourist can no longer find within

its own, modern, individualised world. But where MacCannell (1976) fears that the commodification of local culture will eventually lead to a loss of authenticity, others on the contrary focus on emergent authenticity (Cohen, 1988) or an increased awareness of cultural and ethnic features (Bras, 2000). In light of this difference, Reisinger and Steiner (2006) distinguish between modernist, constructivist and postmodernist views on the concept of authenticity. While modernist such as MacCannell (1976) argue there is an objective basis against which to assess authenticity, constructivists (e.g., Cohen, 1988) reject the idea of a true reality and claim that authenticity is a socially constructed interpretation, unfixed, subjective, variable and hence negotiable. Postmodernist stress that authenticity is irrelevant or of little concern to tourists (Reisinger and Steiner, 2006). We agree with Belhassen and Caton's (2006, p.855) response to Reisinger and Steiner that "as long as the many notions of object authenticity are still 'out there' in the minds and lives of individuals acting in the 'tourism world', it is for academia to study them" and hence authenticity matters.

We also agree that, in the discussion on image building in tourism, it might be more important to look at the process through which authenticity is constructed, rather than to clarify whether a certain experience or attraction is 'really' authentic or not (Bras, 2000; Cohen, 1988). Authenticity is socially constructed by different actors: the tourists themselves, tour operators, travel agencies, tour-leaders, the local tour guide, local and national policy makers (Bras, 2000) and there are different views on how to define, formulate, manipulate or reproduce Belize as a tourism destination. With slogans like "Belize – The Adventure Coast, Undiscovered and Unspoiled", local and international tourism entrepreneurs and the Belizean government try to catch up with this search for authentic experiences. Notions of authenticity, novelty or remoteness equally apply to natural sites and convey the message that tourists can get back in touch with pristine nature (Duffy, 2002). While tourism in Belize does focus on archaeological and cultural assets, a major part of the industry concentrates on nature tourism. Attracting tourists with headlines like "The exotic mainland, natural and unspoiled" (Belize Tourism Industry Association, 2003) appeals to a search for authenticity: an unspoiled natural environment for those looking for the original, unchanged or real. Images in tourism marketing try to communicate an experience. This experience is formed in the mind of tourists before they leave, but takes further shape during the visit (Duffy, 2002; Phillips, 1994; Salazar, 2006). In the case of a product that puts strong emphasis on the 'unspoiled', the 'unchanged', the 'authentic' or whatever you want to call it, care has to be taken to keep it that way, both in reality and in the imagination of tourists.

### *2.3 Authenticity and sustainability*

The government of Belize formally adopted responsible or sustainable tourism (Duffy, 2002; Ministry of Tourism and Environment, 1998; Palacio and McCool, 1997; Patullo, 2005). 'Sustainable', 'alternative', or 'responsible' tourism is usually presented as an alternative to mass tourism and the assumed detrimental effects of most forms of mass tourism. Mass tourism is then viewed upon as foreign controlled, enclavic, unplanned, short-term, culturally destructive and environmentally unsustainable (Brohman, 1996, p.66). According to Fennel alternative tourism is

“a generic term that encompasses a whole range of tourism strategies (e.g., ‘appropriate’, ‘eco’, ‘soft’, ‘responsible’, ‘people to people’, ‘controlled’, ‘small scale’, ‘cottage’ and ‘green’ tourism) all of which purport to offer a more benign alternative to conventional mass tourism.” (Fennel, 1999, p.9)

Brohman (1996, p.63) argues that these terms have come to “mean almost anything that can be juxtaposed to conventional mass tourism”. However, these alternative forms of tourism are recognised to have its drawbacks as well. Ryan even argues that:

“If ‘special interest tourism’ is an alternative to ‘mass tourism’ then it will become a cancer – endlessly reproducing its small groups across the globe invading previously untouched communities. It is as large a threat to sustainability as the worse examples of mass tourism.” (Ryan, 2002, p.23)

Moreover, concepts such as nature tourism, ecotourism, sustainable or responsible tourism serve as marketing tools, since they are used as labels to sell a product: “Environmentally sensitive, responsible, low-impact, alternative, softpath, and ecotourism are some of the new labels that produce guilt-free travel” (Ocko, 1990, p.3). The concept of sustainable tourism is more than a set of practices. It appeals to (some) tourists motives and desires, which goes further than only a ‘feeling good’ aspect. Offering something under the label of ‘sustainable’ tourism proves that it is worth sustaining it. It therefore can become highly sought after by tourists, just like ‘authenticity’. Statements with regard to sustainable tourism hence are intrinsically linked to tourism marketing and contribute to a destination’s image. The active promotion by the Belizean government and the private sector as a country that takes pride in conservation, appeals to tourists looking for the unspoiled: apparently there is something that needs to be kept and the concept of sustainability attributes to the construction of an ‘authentic’ experience. Cohen (2002, p.274) already pointed out that “there is a hiatus in the literature between the discourses of authenticity and sustainability in tourism”. Cohen also goes further than to conclude that the concept of sustainability acquires promotional value because of its desirability for tourists. He neither ends with observing that precisely the more sensitive natural environmental and cultural sites, and hence the ones that encounter most serious problems of environmental or cultural sustainability, are most attractive for those in search of authenticity. Cohen differentiates between MacCannell’s objective authenticity, the experience of authenticity and the concept of ‘existential authenticity’. He refers to Selwyn’s distinction between the notion of ‘hot’ (or subjective) authenticity as “the imagined world of tourist make-believe” (Selwyn, 1996, p.20) and ‘cool’ authenticity which is ‘objectively verifiable’ (Selwyn, 1996, p.8) and claims that tourists are searching for both. In doing so he explains how tourists might be satisfied with overtly contrived authenticity on the one hand – diminishing the burden on sustainability – while intensifying the quest for the ‘really authentic’ on the other hand – increasing the problem of sustainability (Cohen, 2002). Image building in tourism, specifically with regard to alternative types of tourism such as ecotourism, builds upon the notion of ‘hot’ or ‘subjective’ authenticity in particular when promoting unspoiled and remote wilderness, even if these sites have been remodelled to suit tourists’ needs (Duffy, 2002).

The strong growth of tourism, in particular cruise tourists in Belize (see also Berendse and Roessingh, 2005; Duffy, 2002; Patullo, 2005; Roessingh and Berendse, 2005) and the recent government policy of professionalising the industry make Belize an interesting subject to study issues of image building, authenticity and sustainability. Belize almost

“avoided conventional mass-tourism by default, because of poor communications, both internal and with the outside world, [and] poor infrastructure” and became “fashionably synonymous with ecotourism” (Patullo, 2005, p.152). As long as the industry remained small, the green image of the country was ‘evident’ (see also Sutherland, 1998).

The image of a ‘hidden paradise’, ‘unspoiled’ and a ‘secret’ has been built, for a large part, on the conventional dichotomy of mass tourism on the one hand and small-scale, sustainable tourism on the other. In this paper we focus on the debates surrounding the diversification of the Belizean tourism product and the consequences for representing destination Belize. First some methodological details will be provided, followed by an overview of the industry developments in Belize. The results then focus on image building in Belize, the case of cave tourism, and entrepreneurial strategies to cope with the process of diversification. The paper concludes with a discussion on policy implications.

### **3 Methodology**

The data presented in this paper are the result of ethnographic research conducted in Belize between January 2003 and June 2003. Focus was on the micro-stories of a specific group of tourism entrepreneurs: lodge owners, tour operators and tour guides. The fieldwork primarily took place in the Cayo district, a region that traditionally focuses on (eco-) nature tourism, and home to some of the first lodges in the country. The research subject was approached as a case study with an intrinsic as well as an instrumental focus (Stake, 2003). This means that the case is used to provide an insight into this particular subject (the Belizean situation), as well as to facilitate the understanding of a more general issue (image building in the tourism industry as a whole). The purpose of the study is to gain an understanding of the situation within its context, rather than generalisation beyond (Stake, 2003).

Several qualitative research methods were used to gain understanding of the practices and the attitudes and different roles of the people that shape the tourism industry. Participant observation and informal or low-keyed conversations took place during guided tours ( $n = 12$ ) and monthly meetings of the Cayo branch of the Belize Tourism Industry Association ( $n = 4$ ) and the Cayo Tour Guide Association ( $n = 4$ ). Combined with secondary data like statistics, consultancy reports, government action plans or policies and newspapers’ papers, this provided the topic list for the interviews.

In-depth interviews ( $n = 14$ ) were conducted with several types of informants (using snowball methods): one tour operator and one tour guide, four lodge owners who also conducted tours, four government representatives and four respondents who were working in tourism education and private or government related tourism projects. No data have been directly obtained from tourists. Even though, as becomes apparent, image building in tourism involves assumptions about (different types) of tourists, the actual perception of the tourists themselves is irrelevant for the central line of argumentation within this paper. This paper explicitly focuses on the process of image building and the strategies of tourism entrepreneurs. Rather than assessing the accurateness of widely held assumptions about tourists, focus is on how local entrepreneurs deal with this matter.

After providing a general overview of tourism developments in Belize and discussions on the consequences of the diversification of the industry for destination image building, we will focus on the case of cave tourism, in order to explore the

strategies actors use in daily practices. The case of cave tourism has been chosen, as it is symbolic for the wider discussion: it literally illustrates how cruise tourists are seen to invade the (backstage) space of Belize's traditional overnight tourists. It should be noted that the discussion surrounding caving is not unique, and the same issues arise with regard to other popular tourist attractions, such as the islands (cayes) or archaeological Maya sites on the mainland.

#### **4 Belize and tourism: an overview**

Belize's tourism industry started out in the 1960s on San Pedro, Ambergris Caye, where small, mainly American investors started promoting Belize as a fishing, diving and snorkelling paradise (Barry, 1995). However it was only in the 1980s that the Belizean Government started to pay attention to tourism as a serious option for development. Until then the ruling People's United Party (PUP) had been resenting tourism, mainly driven by anti-colonial feelings (Barry, 1995). On 21 September, 1981, Belize, the former British Honduras, became independent (Roessingh, 2001). Belize's first Prime Minister George Price and the PUP condemned 'tourism as whorish' (Munt and Higinio, 1993, p.61) and the government at that time "virtually frowned on the industry and from all accounts, did its utmost to discourage its development" (Woods et al., 1992, p.83). This radically changed when in 1984 the United Democratic Party (UDP) was forced by the World Bank and IMF to diversify the Belizean economy after the worldwide recession. Funding and loans were provided to improve the tourism infrastructure (Woods et al., 1992; Barry, 1995).

The marketability of Belize might best be summarised by 'three Rs' rather than by the famous Caribbean 'three Ss', since 'rainforest, reef and ruins' better encompass the Belizean tourism assets than 'sun, sand and sea' (Ministry of Tourism and Environment, 1998, pp.1–3). Market research revealed that tour operators characterised Belize as 'undiscovered', 'uncrowded', 'off the beaten track' and 'authentic' (Ministry of Tourism and Environment, 1998). Subsequent government plans all focused on market-driven strategies such as 'eco-cultural-tourism' and on promoting responsible tourism as a way of doing tourism rather than a type or segment of tourism. Responsible tourism encompasses what can be called eco-tourism, but also 'natural heritage' tourism, diving and marine-oriented tourism as Belize's specific niche markets. It refers to an ethic and a set of practices that chart a sensible course for all types of tourism, including those on a larger scale, such as cruise tourism (Belize Tourism Board, 2003). It was expected that the alternative tourist that formed Belize's most important existing and potential future market, would be attracted by the image of 'a destination that cares' (Ministry of Tourism and Environment, 1998). The concept of responsible tourism hence serves both as a concept for sustainable development and as a marketing image to attract tourists.

Visitation numbers for major Mayan sites in Guatemala, Mexico and Honduras are evidence of the increased popularity of the Mundo Maya (Maya World) amongst tourists. Also Belize developed its major archaeological sites into tourism sites, building access roads, sanitary and parking facilities and visitor centres (Berendse, 2005). Cruise tourists in particular benefit from this increased accessibility. Cruise passenger arrivals to the Caribbean grew by an estimated 10% in 2002 (Caribbean Tourism Organization, 2003). With a growth of 564.4% in cruise visitor arrivals in the same year, Belize was the fastest



growing cruise tourism destination in the region. Since 1991, there has been an average annual increase of 2.7% in the number of overnight-tourist arrivals (Central Statistical Office, 2000). On the one hand, the early figures of the new millennium show no remarkable growth (185,705 tourists in 2001 and 186,087 in 2002). But on the other hand, when looking at the figures of cruise ship arrivals (48,116 in 2001 and 319,690 in 2002) there is an explosive growth of 585% between 2001 and 2002 (Belize Tourism Board, 2003). Consequently the Belizean tourism industry diversifies, catering to two specific niches: cruise tourists and 'alternative' tourists. This raises questions with regard to authenticity, sustainability and image building.

## 5 Results

### 5.1 *Images of the image: a closer look at destination image building in Belize*

In 1934, Huxley made a journey to Central America on board of a Norwegian banana boat, after having left his cruise ship at Kingston, Jamaica. On this journey he passed by British Honduras, present-day Belize. Huxley describes this country as follows:

"If the world had any ends, British Honduras would certainly be one of them. It is not on the way from anywhere to anywhere else. It has no strategic value. It is all but uninhabited, and when Prohibition is abolished, the last of its profitable enterprises ... will have gone the way of its commerce in logwood, mahogany and chicle. Why then do we bother to keep this strange little fragment of the empire?" (Huxley, 1984, p.21)

Of course the tourist 'industry' was at that time still an undefined future phenomenon. But Huxley did describe a hidden country that did not play any role in the Caribbean hemisphere or in Central America. This is not surprising for a country with only 51,347 inhabitants in 1931 (Bolland, 1986).

In 1961, Stanton Robbins and Co. Inc. provide one of the first serious tourism studies in Belize, with their Provisional Blueprint for Tourism Development. They comment on the tourist assets of British Honduras that:

"The present undeveloped character of the country is one of its real attractions. Only a few hours away from some of the world's largest areas of industrial development, metropolitan centres and concentrations of modern sophistication, people can visit a country nearly in its natural state where modern civilisation, as most people know it, is just beginning to penetrate." (Stanton Robbins and Co. Inc., 1961, p.6)

In January 1972, de la Haba (1972), a journalist writing for National Geographic, comments on Huxley that he found in Belize "not the end of the world but the beginning of a nation". Although he does not say anything about tourism at that time, he presents a country that is still hidden and undeveloped. Instead of marginalising Belize like Huxley does, de la Haba values its purity and unspoiled character. Antique books like those of Huxley and John. L. Stephens' "Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan", published in 1969 by Dover Publications Inc in New York (as a republication of the original book in 1841), are perfect examples of the way the authentic is presented along the Mundo Maya circuit and have contributed to the way history is reproduced through accessible writing and hence to the image building of Belize as a tourism destination. Over the years, the exposure of Belize in popular,

world-wide available magazines, photo shoots and movies of for instance National Geographic or Jacques Cousteau (whose exploration of the Blue Hole in a television documentary in 1972 contributed to the popularity of the Belizean Barrier Reef), appeal to the imagination of the tourist who travels through the circuit.

Seventy years after Huxley, Belize's remote character is still used in the main advertising campaign to attract tourists. Today's Belize still answers to an image of being undeveloped and far away from the civilised world. A slogan like "Where the Hell is Belize" – written on the front of baseball caps and T-shirts (of which the backside says 'who the hell cares') – implies that Belize sells itself as a relatively unknown country. These slogans, but also those earlier mentioned, give this country in Central America the image of a place that is unique, unspoiled, and somehow exclusive. Tourism images are used to communicate a message, to redefine and enhance the positive perception of a product and to aim at a specific segment of the market (Morgan and Pritchard, 1998; Palacio and McCool, 1993, 1997). The image of Belize as 'a secret' that should be treated responsible, not only communicates the message that tourists will find something unique, it also positively separates Belize from other 'spoiled' or 'discovered' countries and it points at the benefits that potential visitors are seeking (Palacio and McCool, 1993, 1997). In doing so the Belizean Government aims at the motives and desires of the so called 'new' tourist who is expected to be after individual or small group trips, variety, authenticity, novelty and safe adventure (Duffy, 2002; Ministry of Tourism and Environment, 1998).

But when one asks people from both public and private sector whether the slogan "Mother Nature's Best Kept Secret" still applies to Belize as a tourism destination, answers range considerably. An informant comments on this slogan that "a secret can only be a secret once", implying that at a certain point in time it will simply be gone. Others relate it to the number of tourists that are arriving ("when being inundated with 2000 other tourists, what is the secret being kept?"), the level of awareness ("still a lot of people know very little about our country") or the state of the industry ("Belize is a destination that is up and coming"). An informant at the Belize Tourism Board is very clear: "I do not even want to begin to think that we have reached the edge". But what constitutes the edge? Critics in Belize point to the problem of the image not living up to reality. As a resort owner remarked:

"The slogan makes a promise. "Mother Nature's best-kept secret" sounds like an oatmeal cookie to me, or you know ... something sweet. So once you are thinking of that it makes hard to live up to."

Somebody else comments: "The worst thing you can do is to destroy someone's expectations". However, when the tourism industry diversifies, those who are visiting may desire different experiences and this has implications for representing Belize as a tourism destination, both in tourism image building as in reality.

Tourists' experiences are evaluated "on a real-unreal scale" (Bras, 2000, p.31), however the criteria in doing so vary greatly depending on the observer (Bras, 2000). Authenticity (in practice) is socially constructed: "Different individuals may entertain more or less rigorous criteria by which they judge the 'authenticity' of a site, object or event" and

"as the more mature tourist centres become developed destinations of mass tourism, the more adventurous, authenticity-seeking tourists move further afield in quest of 'pristine' nature and 'unspoilt' natives." (Cohen, 2002, p.270)

The intrusion of tourists in backstage regions in search of higher degrees of authenticity let several scholars to focus on cultural conflicts between the visitors and the visited. Tourism entrepreneurs may highlight certain elements over others, distracting tourists from things they want to keep hidden. Different images meet in actual encounters and sometimes these might clash (Salazar, 2006). Cultural conflicts however occur at different moments and places, but also at different levels (Roessingh and Duijnhoven, 2004). While Goffman's distinction between front- and backstage areas has often been applied to contacts between hosts and guests, it is part of a more complex system of cultural (ex)change, which also involves keeping different audiences separated in order not to cause conflicting situations (Roessingh and Duijnhoven, 2004). The discussion about representing Belize as an authentic or unspoiled tourism destination should be analysed as such.

It is widely acknowledged that cruise tourism is the closest thing to mass tourism that Belize has experienced (Duffy, 2002; Patullo, 2005). Cruise tourist arrivals to Belize not only outnumber overnight land tourists, they are representing a new type of tourism; mass tourism as opposed to small-scale or alternative tourism. It is widely assumed that mass and small-scale tourists have different agendas and interests (Duffy, 2002; Patullo, 2002). Whether this is true or not does not really matter for the sake of the argument. As what matters is that many actors in the (Belizean) tourism industry act upon this premise. We will further elaborate on this, by looking at a specific case, wherein both 'audiences' visit the same 'theatre': we will focus on cave tourism.

## *5.2 Cave tourism: transit area for different groups of tourists*

Caving is booming business in Belize. Not only the traditional overnight tourists have caving on their itinerary. The growing stream of cruise passengers is interested in Belize's underground activities as well. This results in a choice for different cave experiences. One of the cave's, 'Actun Tunichil Muknal', is visited mainly by overnight tourists staying in San Ignacio (Cayo district) or at one of Cayo's lodges. In 2003, only two companies were allowed to bring tourists to this place in the Tapir Mountain Nature Reserve, which is not easy to reach. Every day a small group of people is taken on a bumpy car ride, walks through the jungle, wades through underground streams and climbs over gigantic rocks before entering the huge labyrinth of chambers full of ceramic pots, artifacts and skeletal remains. Cruise tourists primarily visit a cave called 'Jaguar Paw'. On 'cruise ship days' up to 40 tour buses filled with tubers can arrive at Jaguar Paw. The parking lot can accommodate a dozen of tour buses at the same time and holds several facilities for its visitors (e.g., toilets). Upon arrival the visitors are equipped with a tube and flashlights and after a short hike, accompanied by a guide they are dropped off up stream to float through the caves and the rain forest, only to arrive back at the starting point two hours later. Contrary to Actun Tunichil Muknal, the site is next to the highway and its paved road to the entrance makes it within close (and timely) reach from Belize City, where the cruise tourists embark. The brief descriptions of Jaguar Paw and Actun Tunichil Muknal not only depict two different experiences. The case of caving in Belize illustrates how cruise tourists are seen to invade the backstage space of Belize's traditional overnight tourists. While the 'cruise tourism discussion' appears all over the country, also with regard to other Maya sites or the islands, cruise tourists' entrance into the caves (hidden 'by nature') literally symbolise the intrusion into an unspoiled and undiscovered destination. Caving used to be a small-scale, rather exclusive adventure.

But with the establishment of business enterprises such as Jaguar Paw, caving becomes within reach of a new, a distinctive and above all, a large audience. The growth of cruise tourism therefore provides us with a good example to analyse how different stakeholders within the Belizean tourism industry use notions of authenticity and sustainability related to tourism policy and planning in general, and to the issue of image building in particular. Many well-established tourism entrepreneurs have pretty clear ideas about the areas where certain tourists should or should not go. Amongst this group, it is assumed that the traditional overnight tourist is looking for something more concealed than the cruise tourism passenger does. Therefore established tourist resorts on the mainland (re)act upon the growing popularity of certain caves among cruise tourists:

“I will not send my guests to that destination, because I can’t run the risk of them going there and floating inside the cave with seven hundred cruise ship passengers. And we know a lot of other caves that the cruise ship people would never go to. It just means that we would become more unique in our product.”  
(Resort owner)

“I like to be out there with only my guests, I don’t like to see other tourists with other tour guides doing the same thing that I’m doing, in the same area when I’m there. I want them to feel that the tour is special, that they are the only ones there. If I can’t offer that kind of experience any more at that cave, it’s time for me to move on again.” (Tour guide)

When it comes to caving, both types of tourists participate in the same activities and visit the same tourist attractions (e.g., Maya sites). In other words, they make use of similar cultural and natural assets. One way or the other, these assets have been transformed or converted such that they can be used to fit their needs (McKercher and du Cros, 2002): either by building visible infrastructure such as paved roads, parking lots and toilet cabins or by finding the best pathway through the jungle and ‘inventing’ stories to accompany tourists on their way to the cave’s entrance. Where visitors to Actun Tunichil Muknal hike through the jungle carrying a helmet and a backpack with food for the lunch picnic, Jaguar Paw offers its guests a lunch in the restaurant, a pool and even a 60 min aerial trek canopy tour. Both tours are promoted as ‘adventure’, but they adapt to tourists’ wishes in different ways. The difference can be framed in terms of the accepted levels of change, and the criteria in doing so may vary amongst tourists and tourism producers. Moreover, the quest for authenticity may be considered a prominent motive of modern tourism by some (MacCannell, 1976), but other reasons such as pleasure, enjoyment, consumption, well-being or interaction with others also seem to motivate contemporary tourists (Cohen, 2002; Morgan and Pritchard, 1998). The latter might be exactly what many cruise tourists are after. So when talking about Belize destroying or losing its image as a pristine and undiscovered destination, most people are talking about the assumed overnight tourists’ image.

For MacCannell’s ‘alienated modern individuals’ who are looking for a world that they see as more real than their own, concepts such as ‘unspoiled’, ‘hidden’ and ‘a secret’ appeal to the search for ‘authenticity’. ‘Unspoiled, hidden and secret’ are then taken literally: as soon as too many people know about it, then it is not a secret or hidden any more (as can be seen in some of the reactions to Belize’s most prominent slogan “Mother Natures Best Kept Secret”). In this view, the presence of tourism spoils the product and that is why several scholars have labelled those forms of tourism ‘self-destroying’ (MacCannell, 1976; van den Berghe, 1994). Exactly those sites that are perceived as highly authentic often are the most valuable in terms of sustainability

(Cohen, 2002). This is why, after expressing concerns that the growth of tourism in Belize would negatively affect its destination image, many stakeholders directly move on to the issue of sustainable tourism development: "Important is that we are mindful of the impact of every load that tourism has" or "the key is that we can manage the impact on our national resources". The ways of dealing with this issue vary: some people ask for strict regulations by limiting the number of people going into the caves and by properly training guides to protect both the cave and the well being of the visitors. Others do not see any harm in sending massive groups to a cave like Jaguar Paw as "it is a very roomy cave that can hold a lot of people and there is no need to worry about people stepping on artifacts as they are simply tubing". These strategies focus on the caves' carrying capacity, since restricting the number of visitors, for example through price discrimination, is a primary means in maintaining sustainability (Cohen, 2002). Besides protection of the natural assets and cultural artefacts, another thing needs to be protected: the image of an unspoiled destination that cares.

### 5.3 *Entrepreneurial strategies*

Well-established tourism providers are not just concerned with cruise tourists destroying the sites, but also (or even more so) with safeguarding the correct image and a congruent experience for Belize's traditional stay over tourists. Amongst these enterprises, various coping strategies can be discerned. Tour operators and tour guides start to classify the tourists: "The kind of people that are on cruise ships are not the kind of people that are fit for Tunichil". Several tour operators and resort owners refuse to deal with cruise ship passengers because they do not want to see their business turn into "just another high-impact destructive tourism operation". This not only reflects the promotional value of sustainability in itself, but also the fear that in doing not so, this will convey the wrong impression and "blacklist Belize in environmental terms" (Duffy, 2002, p.85). Various operators use strategies to continue doing business according to their own philosophy. This for example leads to ranking the caves in order of "high adventure in wild and unspoiled caves" to the more group oriented cave tubing in a place like Jaguar Paw. They try to minimise the impact of cruise tourists by simply saying: "They can screw up that cave as long as they stay out of the other caves". As long as this relates to issues of image building and myth making, these strategies very much focus on keeping different types of tourism (mass and small-scale tourism) apart, applying the notion of front- and backstage both in space and in time: either particular caves are avoided at any time, or only on 'cruise ship days', because the cruise ships (still) only arrive at certain days of the week.

The discussion about the image of Belize as a tourism destination seems to be a discussion of conflicting views. The increase of cruise passenger arrivals and hence the idea of different 'types of tourism' is more than a contrast between 'mass' tourism and 'small' scale tourism. Most tour operators differentiate between cruise tourists and overnight tourists in terms of a different type of tourists: where the cruise ship passenger might be satisfied with the experience of tubing in bigger groups, the overnight tourist is supposed to look for places that are still relatively undisturbed, some of which might even distinguish between caves with designated pathways. And the presence of the first interferes with the 'pure' experience of the latter.

## **6 Conclusion**

The image of Belize as an authentic paradise, unspoiled and with consideration for the natural environment has been built, for a large part, on the conventional dichotomy of (destructive) mass tourism on the one hand and (sustainable) small-scale tourism on the other. The growth of tourism, cruise tourism in particular, hence led to conflicting views with regard to the official tourism branding of Belize.

An objectivist view on authenticity in addition to seeing this as the sole motive underlying tourists' expectations, seems to hinder adequate tourism planning, policy and marketing. A cave trip to Actun Tunichil Muknal might be less crowded and 'more authentic' in the eyes of some visitors, but for other tourists tubing at Jaguar Paw is the ultimate adventure or 'authentic' tour. Authenticity then depends on the point of reference. Besides that, authenticity is just one explanatory reason for travel. Cruise tourists may have different reasons for visiting the caves. The caves that are used for cruise tourism are closer to the dock and easily accessible by bus, the tour takes less time and is not that strenuous. The differentiation then is not solely a matter of motivation, whether this is a quest for authenticity or not, but also of (amongst others) accessibility, the physical condition of the tourists and the carrying capacity of the cave.

Different people may be attracted by different images. Also different people take part in constructing these images and, equally important for our argument, act towards their interpretation of tourists' expectations. Popular media like movies, documentaries, magazines and travel advertisements such as travel guides and brochures, have historically produced a certain image of Belize. While on the global level, actors such as Jacques Cousteau, National Geographic or Lonely Planet may have played an important role, local actors also take part in constructing the image of Belize. The Belizean Government is responsible for tourism policy and planning. Ultimately the tourism industry (tour operators, tour guides, taxi drivers, restaurant and shop owners, and so on) then provides the tourist with a product. Preferably this experience meets the expectations of the previously established image.

Within this process, different actors are highlighting certain aspects over others, often out of self-interest (e.g., a strive towards national identity, environmental consciousness, economic gain, political influence). Differences are not only found between various groups of stakeholders, but also within groups such as the nation-wide Belize Tourism Industry Association. Typically you find well-established tourism entrepreneurs vs. nascent enterprises or the Cayo district vs. Belize City. Traditionally, many exclusive lodges have been founded in the Cayo district. Developing a new tourism business is overtly seen as a threat, and obviously quite a few of those entrepreneurs are very critical. While for other districts, like Belize City, cruise tourism may be conceived of as an opportunity.

Analysing the case of cave tourism in Belize shows that it is important to recognise how diversification of the tourism industry implies the construction of different images or marketing strategies. Moreover, in terms of tourism policy and planning this recognition allows for spatial strategies to accommodate to these divergent wishes. Caves and other parts of the 'hidden' and 'unspoiled' interior provide the backstage of the alternative, stay-over tourist, whereas cruise tourists (visiting the area in larger groups) could be directed to designated parts of the hidden interior. As long as these groups do not meet, these images do not clash. However, as becomes evident from this study, these different forms of tourism do get entangled, increasingly becoming a source of conflict.

And while this paper concentrated on cave tourism, the same issues arise with regard to other tourist activities (the cayes or Maya sites). The Belizean government needs to acknowledge the importance of creating different zones. As mentioned before, this not only relates to 'spatial zones', but also to different 'time zones'. Not everybody has to be everywhere at the same time. It is interesting to see that, even though the government does not (yet) actively develop and encourage such policy, local entrepreneurs' coping strategies already hint towards that. However, to date this tends to relate more to 'territorialism', rather than sound national tourism policy.

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